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Review

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by Philippe Borgeaud

Review by: Jan Bremmer

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BOOK NOTES

La mémoire des religions. Edited by PHILIPPE BORGEAUD. Geneva: Editions Labor et Fides, 1988. Pp. 147.

Recent decades have seen the steep rise of discussions on the differences made by the introduction of writing on oral cultures. This collection by mainly Swiss scholars is part of that movement. As Philippe Borgeaud notes in his introduction (pp. 7–20), writing has made a great difference in the ways religions acquire, conserve, and transmit their knowledge and practices. Whereas traditions once had to be memorized, they now gradually became fixed for all times. This development naturally poses a number of questions. Who were these specialists who once orally transmitted religious traditions? Who could read? Who transmitted religious writings to whom? Was writing itself incorporated into the religious sphere? What happened outside the sphere of writing? Is tradition equally important in each religion? These and other questions are discussed as regards ancient Mesopotamia (pp. 21–35), Greece (pp. 37–78), India (pp. 115–44), Judaism (pp. 79–89), early Christianity (pp. 91–104), and Manichaeism and early Islam (pp. 105–13).

As an illustration of the collection's content, I will mention two of its most interesting chapters. Fritz Stolz's analysis of Mesopotamian myths shows how in this bilingual environment (Sumerian and Akkadian) the phenomenon of listing, one of the first products of writing, has exercised great influence on the ways Mesopotamia thought of and categorized its gods. Moreover, listing gods helped to expand the mental horizon and, eventually, promoted a more abstract approach to religious life. Esther Starobinski-Safran well shows how the commandment to remember appears in the most diverse texts of Judaism, in its exegesis, and in the Jewish liturgy. In short, this is a well-edited and most stimulating collection. [JAN BREMMER, *Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*]

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